

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE

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TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE, IS, PLO

SUBJECT: JOSEPH KRAFT ARTICLE RE INTERVIEW WITH ASAD

REF: DAMASCUS 8216 (NOT SENT JERUSALEM)

FOLLOWING IS FULL TEXT OF KRAFT ARTICLE, WRITTEN FOLLOWING
HIS NOV 29 INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT ASAD, AS IT APPEARED IN
WASHINGTON POST DEC 2:

BEGIN TEXT: "A CAUTION LIGHT FROM SYRIA'S ASSAD."

DAMASCUS -- PRESIDENT HAFEZ ASSAD OF SYRIA HAS ABANDONED

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HIS VETO OF EFFORTS BY EGYPT TO RENEW PEACE TALKS WITH

ISRAEL. HE IS PREPARED TO END SYRIA'S VIRTUAL OCCUPATION OF LEBANON AT AN EARLY DATE, AND WILL NOT USE, OR ALLOW PALESTINIAN COMMANDOS TO USE LEBANON AS A PLATFORM FOR ASSAULTS ON ISRAEL. BUT HE MAKES IT CLEAR THAT A SETTLEMENT WILL REQUIRE FACING SQUARELY SEVERAL EXTREMELY DIFFICULT ISSUES THAT MANY SOPHISTICATED PERSONS IN ISRAEL, EGYPT AND THE UNITED STATES HOPE TO FINESSE.

THOSE ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS OF A LONG, WIDE-RANGING INTERVIEW I HAD WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD THE OTHER DAY. THE INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE AT THE PRESIDENT'S UNPRETENTIOUS OFFICE IN THE DIPLOMATIC QUARTER OF THIS CITY. IT WAS, I THINK, THE

FIRST ONE GIVEN BY THE SYRIAN PRESIDENT SINCE HIS COUNTRY ENDED THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR BY A TAKEOVER OF THAT COUNTRY 10 DAYS AGO.

ASSAD WAS, AS ALWAYS, THOUGHTFUL IN Demeanor AND METICULOUS ABOUT BEING SURE THAT HE FULLY UNDERSTOOD ALL QUESTIONS. HE SHOWED NO SIGNS OF BEING COCK-A-HOOB ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF THE LONG, DRAWN-OUT LEBANESE DRAMA. NEITHER DID HE SHOW STRAIN FROM AN ENTERPRISE THAT AT TIMES BROUGHT HIM INTO CONFLICT WITH RUSSIA, THE UNITED STATES, ISRAEL, ALL THE OTHER ARAB STATES, THE PALESTINIANS AND VARIOUS COMMUNITIES IN LEBANON. ON THE CONTRARY, HE WAS AT EASE ENOUGH TO JOKE A COUPLE OF TIMES ABOUT HIS POOR ENGLISH AND HIS WEAKNESS IN THE CLASSICAL ARABIC SPOKEN BY HIS INTERPRETER.

I STARTED THE QUESTIONS BY ASKING ABOUT SYRIA'S ROLE IN LEBANON, AND WHETHER THE PRESIDENT INTENDED TO KEEP HIS FORCES IN THAT COUNTRY INDEFINITELY. "I HAVE NO SUCH INTENTION AND IT HAS NEVER BEEN IN OUR MIND," HE SAID.

HE WOULD NOT SET A FIXED DATE FOR SYRIAN WITHDRAWAL, BUT HINGED IT TO THE RESUMPTION OF AUTHORITY BY THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT UNDER PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS. HE SAID HE HOPED PRESIDENT SARKIS WOULD RESTORE NORMAL AUTHORITY "AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE."

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I TURNED THE QUESTIONS TO THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER OF LEBANON, WHICH ABUTS ISRAEL. I ASKED IF IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE--AS THE ISRAELIS HOPED--TO MAINTAIN A BORDER BUFFER ZONE THAT WOULD BE HELD BY CHRISTIAN AND SHI'ITE MOSLEM VILLAGERS NOT HOSTILE TO ISRAEL. ASSAD SAID THAT THAT WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE. IF PRIVATE MILITIA FORCES WERE MAINTAINED ALONG THE BORDER, HE EXPLAINED, THEN VARIOUS GROUPS, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIANS, WOULD DEMAND THE RIGHT TO MAINTAIN

PRIVATE FORCES ELSEWHERE IN LEBANON.

BUT HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT HE DID NOT BELIEVE THE PALESTINIANS SHOULD CONTROL THE BORDER EITHER. HE FAVORED PUTTING BORDER CONTROL UNDER "A REGULAR LEBANESE FORCE," WHICH MIGHT INCLUDE ELEMENTS FROM SYRIA AND OTHER ARAB STATES.

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I RAISED NEXT THE MATTER OF NEW MOVES TOWARD A PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT, POINTING OUT THAT PRESIDENT SADAT OF EGYPT WAS PUSHING HARD FOR A RENEWAL OF THE EFFORTS BROKEN OFF WHEN SYRIA OPPOSED A FOLLOWUP TO THE SECOND SINAI WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT NEGOTIATED BETWEEN ISRAEL AND EGYPT BY SECRETARY OF STATE KISSINGER A YEAR AGO SEPTEMBER.

PRESIDENT ASSAD SAID THAT HIS OPPOSITION TO SINAI II WAS A THING OF THE PAST, AND THAT HE AND SADAT HAD "OVERCOME THE PHASE OF DIFFERENCES AND ENTERED INTO A NEW PHASE OF UNDERSTANDING, COOPERATION AND COORDINATION." AS TO WHETHER THE MOMENT WAS PROPITIOUS FOR NEGOTIATION, ASSAD FLASHED THE AMBER LIGHT, HE SAID: "I HAVE NOT SAID THAT THE TIME IS NOT RIGHT."

HE ALSO ACCEPTED--AS DISTINCT FROM A PALESTINE THAT WOULD INCLUDE ISRAEL--SADAT'S NOTION THAT THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM COULD BE SETTLED BY FORMATION OF A PALESTINIAN STATE BASED ON LAND ISRAEL NOW OCCUPIES IN THE GAZA STRIP AND THE WEST BANK OF THE JORDAN. "I THINK IT WOULD BE VIABLE," HE SAID, BUT HE CATEGORICALLY REFUSED THE VARIOUS ADJUSTMENTS THAT HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED TO MAKE SETTLEMENT MORE PALATABLE TO ISRAELI PUBLIC OPINION.

HE WAS AGAINST ANY EXCHANGE OF PEOPLES OR GOODS BETWEEN
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ISRAEL AND THE ARAB STATES; ANY BREAK WITH FULL WITHDRAWAL (EVEN FOR THE PURPOSE OF ACHIEVING DEFENSIBLE FRONTIERS) TO THE 1967 BORDERS; AND ANY DILUTION OF PALESTINIAN REPRESENTATION OR STATEHOOD IN FEDERATION WITH JORDAN. HE SAID: "NEITHER WE IN SYRIA NOR THEY IN JORDAN HAVE THOUGHT OF INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN STATE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF...FEDERATION."

EARLIER IN THE INTERVIEW, ASSAD REFERRED DIRECTLY TO DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIS OWN COUNTRY AND RUSSIA OVER LEBANON, AND IMPLIED THAT THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE THE MAJOR ROLE IN MEDIATING ANY SETTLEMENT IN THE MIDEAST. AT THE VERY END HE UNDERLINED THE EXTREME DIFFICULTY OF THAT TASK WITH A CHARACTERISTICALLY RESTRAINED COMPLIMENT TO HENRY KISSINGER. HE SAID:

"I THINK THAT OUR DIFFERENCES WITH DR. KISSINGER...SHOULD
NOT PREVENT US FROM SAYING THAT DR. KISSINGER IN HIS OWN
WAY WAS SERIOUS IN THE SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION." END TEXT.
ROBINSON

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